



The man who lit up Ottawa

He was born in a city illuminated only by fire. Eighty-three years later, he left the capital blazing with electricity

By Janet Uren

A LOT HAPPENED between June 24, 1855—when Thomas Ahearn was born—and June 28, 1938, when he died. Among other things, a very young Ottawa heaved itself over a watershed and plunged into the 20th century. Just 83 years—a single lifetime—but it was enough to transform a city.

A young man in a new world, Thomas Ahearn cast a shrewd, curious eye around him, noticed the emerging technologies of his day, and made them his own. During his life in Ottawa, he made one of the first long-distance telephone calls from the city, installed what was probably the country's first hydraulic generator, brought electricity to city streets and houses, drove Ottawa's first car, inaugurated an electric streetcar system, and invented the electric stove. At the end of his life, he held 11 patents—and nothing was ever the same in Ottawa.

Thomas Ahearn was a first-generation Canadian. His parents, John and Honora Ahearn, emigrated from County Waterford, Ireland, in 1853 and settled at 72 Duke Street on LeBreton Flats. John was a blacksmith who, according to his son, “made tools used in the mills and the shanties



Top: Thomas Ahearn with his daughter, Ethel
Above: The inscription on this photo of Thomas says “Sweet Sixteen, 1871”

and made certain repairs to the mill machinery.” Thomas—the youngest of four brothers—grew up in that bustling industrial district near the Chaudière mills and timber slides amid a clutter of lumberyards and factories. It was a place of energy and activity where, Ahearn remembered, “no boy...was considered of any account till he had swum over...the Chaudière slides.” Born on LeBreton Flats, Thomas Ahearn did not stay there. In the mid-1890s, he built a mansion high on Ashburnam Hill, looking down—literally—on his place of birth. He never looked down on his father: in the garden of Ahearn's big house, he displayed with pride an iron plow that his father had manufactured as a young man in faraway Ireland.

Ahearn attended a historic Ottawa

school—the Ottawa College, a Catholic school that later grew into the University of Ottawa. The school was unique in that it was bilingual: courses were given in English in the mornings and French in the afternoons. It was also unusual among colleges of its kind in that it offered studies in science, as well as the more usual classics. Ahearn studied there until around the time his father died, in 1867. Two of his brothers took over their father's smithy then. The third, Maurice—as unusual in his way as Thomas—went off to play in the band of a travelling circus and later became an artist. As for Thomas, he probably worked for the Booth Company after leaving school, but it was electricity that intrigued him. By the time he was 14, he was hanging around the Montreal Telegraph Company, volunteering to deliver telegrams in return for lessons in telegraphy.

Thomas Ahearn's arrival in the world coincided roughly with a growing practical knowledge of electricity. By 1810, theorists knew that electrical currents could be made to pass along a wire. In 1836, a crude telegraph was invented. Its use was facilitated, in 1844, by the development of a two-pulse code, called the Morse code after its American inventor. The telegraph was the world's first great communications technology.

Telegraphy depended on skilled operators—masters of the code—and to be such an operator was young Thomas's ambition. After learning his trade, he spent a couple of years working for Western Union in New York, returning to Ottawa to work for Canadian Pacific Railway and later for the House of Commons telegraph office. By 1877, the 25-year-old was chief city operator for the Ottawa branch of the Montreal Telegraph Company. It was then that a new invention caught his eye.

Alexander Graham Bell had patented his telephone in 1876, and *Scientific American* lost no time in writing about it. Ahearn read the article and started tinkering. Using cigar boxes and a system of wires and magnets, he created two devices. He sent one 100 miles or so up the Ottawa Valley and, using the existing telegraph wires, placed one of Ottawa's first long-distance telephone call.

Ahearn was not alone in his interest.



Thomas Ahearn with his grandson Gordon and his granddaughter, Janet, the children of Ahearn's daughter, Liliás Southam

Warren Soper, manager of the Dominion Telegraph Company in Ottawa in 1880, also grasped the dazzling potential of the telephone, and the young men raced to open rival telephone exchanges. Bell Telephone promptly bought them out and hired Ahearn as manager of its Ottawa branch.

In 1881, Ahearn and Soper joined forces and set up an electrical contracting firm. Their first client was Bell Telephone, and their first assignment was to string long-distance lines to Montreal, Quebec City, and Pembroke. It was hard labour. Ahearn spent many of those early summers camping out in the bush, slapping at mosquitoes, and shinnying up newly planted telephone poles, with axe in hand, under the sardonic surveillance of tobacco-chewing farmers. The business thrived and, over time, grew into a network of firms that ultimately amalgamated as the Ottawa Telephone Company.

By 1884, Ahearn was doing well enough to propose marriage to Liliás Fleck, sister of Alexander Fleck, owner of the Vulcan Iron Works. Liliás bore a son, Franklin, in 1886 and two years later died giving birth to a second child,

Lilias. Left with two babies, Ahearn moved to a house on Albert Street, just a few doors from his wife's family. There, Lilias' sister, Margaret, joined the household to care for the children, and in 1892, she and Thomas married.

In the 1880s, Ahearn began to earn his nickname—Electricity Ahearn. Thomas Edison had manufactured the first electric generator in the 1850s, and in 1881, Ahearn and Soper installed at the Chaudière Falls what was probably Canada's first hydraulic generator. In 1882, they founded a second company to produce and market electricity and signed a contract with the City of Ottawa to install 165 streetlights. It was the beginning of something big.

Ahearn was proving to be an aggressive businessman. By 1901, he and Soper had bought out several smaller firms and established a monopoly on the supply of electricity to streets and houses all over Ottawa and Hull. For 20 cents a night, subscribers were entitled to five lamps that burned from dusk to midnight. The company's only real competitor, as of 1905, was the City of Ottawa, which finally absorbed its private-sector rival in 1950.

With the Chaudière Falls spewing power, Ahearn looked for other applications. Transportation caught his eye. Since 1870, the only public transport in Ottawa had been provided by trams or sleighs drawn by horse that plodded slowly through the heart of the city. In winter, passengers huddled around small coal-burning stoves in the cars, while those sitting in front obligingly took the reins when the drivers collected fares. Thomas Ahearn decided to modernize the operation.

Though electric streetcars had been used in Richmond, Virginia, since 1888, the technology was believed impractical in Canada's cold winters. Impractical, that is, until Ahearn devised a system of snowplows—rolling brushes to clear the tracks and an underfloor electrical heating system—the first in North America. In 1891, Ahearn and Soper formed the Ottawa Electric Street Railway Company. Soon their cars were carrying passengers by the thousands from Rockcliffe to Britannia or Aylmer and south to Lansdowne Park.

Thomas Ahearn was a thoroughly modern man, not least in his appreciation of advertising. On June 29, 1891,

five-year-old Frank Ahearn ceremoniously closed the switch, and a parade of streetcars, all polished oak and red plush, trundled out of the shed for

the Sabbath holy.” When the Electric Railway Company inaugurated Sunday operations, there was predictably fierce opposition, with critics calling the deci-

well as a businessman, and one of his inspirations was the electric stove. It is hard to imagine the impact of that innovation. Before the arrival of electricity in the kitchen, everyone cooked on coal- or wood-burning stoves, with all the dirt, danger, and difficulty that they entailed. Stove-related fires ravaged Ottawa with depressing regularity.

In 1892, Ahearn—ever the showman—put on an apron and cooked an entire meal on a prototype electric stove, rushing the results by streetcar from the Chaudière plant to the Windsor Hotel (at Metcalfe and Queen Streets), where a roomful of prestigious guests waited. The menu, according to *The Ottawa Journal*, consisted of Consommé Royal, Saginaw Trout, Roast Sirloin of Beef, and Strawberry Puffs. “The interesting and peculiar fact about the edibles,” the paper continued, was that “everything had been cooked by electricity, the first instance on record.”

At the end of the century, Ahearn invested in yet another world-changing technology—the automobile—and, in 1899, drove the first car in Ottawa. It was powered, of course, by electricity.

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their maiden run. With Ahearn sitting jauntily at the controls, the cars were packed with Ottawa luminaries on their way to a lavish celebratory lunch, and the streets were lined with curious onlookers. In its first year of operation, the streetcars carried 1.5 million people; that number tripled in the next five years.

The streetcar heralded the arrival of new attitudes in Ottawa. Workers at the time had only one day off a week, and traditionalists expected them “to keep

sion “flagrant wickedness” and people in Hull complaining that the “riff-raff” of Ottawa would be dumped on their doorsteps every weekend. Ahearn held fast. Raised a Catholic, he had long ago departed the church in a rationalist rage. Sunday for him represented a simple opportunity to take hard-working people into the country for picnics and recreation. The company even built a concert pavilion at Britannia to attract Sunday traffic.

Thomas Ahearn was an inventor as

He invented an electric car heater to go with it, again the first in North America. A year later, Margaret Ahearn followed her husband's example and pursued a wobbling course down Sparks Street to become Ottawa's first woman driver.

In his youth, Thomas Ahearn was an inventor and a businessman; in old age, he mellowed into a public man and philanthropist. As director of the Federal District Commission (today's NCC) in 1927, he found that parkway construction in the west end, including a new interprovincial bridge, had stalled. Reaching into his pocket, he personally financed completion of Champlain Bridge. On a different scale of generosity altogether, when his barber confided that he longed hopelessly to travel, Ahearn went right out and bought him a ticket to Europe.

Ahearn also contributed to the forging of national connections when, in 1927, he headed a broadcasting committee for Canada's 60th-anniversary jubilee. The committee was responsible for installing 32,000 kilometres of wire across Canada and making national broadcasting possible for the

first time. A lifelong supporter of the Liberal Party, Ahearn joined the Privy Council in 1928 and, a few years later, was named one of the first directors of the Bank of Canada (founded in 1935 to stabilize a monetary system rocked by the Depression).

Thomas Ahearn played many roles in his life—engineer, inventor, businessman, showman, and philanthropist. He was also a warm and playful human being, full of jokes and stories. As a boy, his pranks in the telegraph office caused his employer to refer to him as “that young devil Ahearn.” As a young man, he prided himself on a mind-reading parlour trick achieved by discreetly tapping out Morse-code signals on the forehead of a partner in crime. In the 1890s, he good-naturedly dressed as Santa Claus and drove an illuminated streetcar through Ottawa streets, throwing oranges and candy to excited children.

Janet Ritchie, daughter of Liliias (Ahearn) Southam, knew Thomas Ahearn only as an adoring grandfather. “I remember that wonderful house at the top of the hill on Laurier,” she says.

“On Fridays after school, my cousin Joan Ahearn and I used to go to stay with him. Every time it was the same. We'd run in and find him in his study—a room full of electrical things and wires everywhere. Quite incredible. We'd go in and settle down for a long chat. He told us such funny stories, and then we had tea.”

Thomas Ahearn did not discover electricity or invent the telephone, but as a leading member in the impressive second generation of electrical innovators, his impact on the industrial landscape of Ottawa was substantial. A recent “Techmap” of Ottawa—a chronology of hundreds of linked high-technology firms—puts Ahearn & Soper right at the centre, recognizing it as the granddaddy of high technology in this region.

When looking at old photographs of Thomas Ahearn, with his high starched collar and sober waistcoat, it is easy to forget that in his day, he was the most modern of men, the most open to new technologies, the most alive to new possibilities, the most eager for change. Born in a city lit only by fire, he left Ottawa blazing with electric light. **END**